AN ADEQUATE GLIMPSE OF THE TRUTH

February 12, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Exodus 33:17--23
Luke 9:28-36

"Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." -Exodus 33:23

Among the wisest words ever said to me are these...

"What the Christian Church needs is more belief, not more beliefs."

It was said to me by a retired Presbyterian minister on an auspicious occasion in my life. I had traveled from Chicago to my home in Central Pennsylvania at about this time of year to be examined by my Presbytery for ordination. Among the requirements in those days, along with preaching a sermon to the Presbytery and presenting a paper to demonstrate that you knew something about the Bible and how to use it, was a statement of faith which the candidate for ordination read, and then defended orally - in front of the entire Presbytery. It was a harrowing experience. Preparing that statement of faith was a harrowing experience, realizing that at this point one had to stop discussing, studying, writing papers and "stand and deliver." For the purposes of showing fitness for ordination, I did what most candidates do, I have discovered - particularly younger ones. Namely, cover a lot of ground, touch every base from creation to human sin and salvation, from Bible to Church History to Eschatology, illustrating each point with a broad range of historical references, from the early church fathers - Jerome and Augustine - to the big B's of the 60s - Barth, Brunner, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer.

Now the saints in Pennsylvania were not at all sure why I was preparing for ministry in the Midwest instead of Princeton or Pittsburgh, where most of them had matriculated. Particularly, since this school was more noted for John Dewey's progressive ideas about education, and Enrico Fermi's atomic bomb than for turning out theologically sound preachers. I recall hoping that I could dazzle them and in fact, they were generous and did vote me in. I was feeling pretty good when among the well wishers afterward there was this retired minister who lived in State College and had taught a little philosophy at Penn State. I have remembered what he said with more gratitude than anything else that happened that day. He said he liked my statement of faith - but thought it was actually too big.

He said that it was his experience the longer he lived, that he believed fewer things but believed them more; that his life had been a refining and sharpening. "Your statement of faith was good," he said, "but you don't have to believe all that. Focus on a few things and really believe in them... What the Christian Church needs," he said, "is more belief and fewer beliefs."

I have found his advice to be true. There's a sense in which I don't know nearly as much as I did about a lot of things twenty-five or thirty years ago. To be twenty years old is to know what's wrong with the world and how to fix it. There's a wonderful incident in Woody Allen's movie Radio Days, in which a young man, passionately in search of meaning and purpose wants to discuss the Holocaust with his father. "What does it mean?" he asks. "How should I know?" his middle-aged father answers. "I can't even understand how to operate the electric can opener. How am I supposed to understand the Holocaust?" I read somewhere that Saul Bellow moved from New York to Chicago because "he was fed up with intellectuals who had to have an opinion on everything." [See Leonard Sweety, in Liberal Protestantism, Michaelson & Roof, p. 253.]

There is in religion an almost irresistible inclination to explain everything, to reduce the infinite to finite, understandable terms; to reduce the great unknowns, the unfathomable mysteries of our existence to manageable dimensions. That is the theme of a wonderful story in the Book of Exodus which is delightful in its playfulness but profound in its humanness and its integrity.

The scene is Mt. Sinai in the middle of the wilderness. The children of Israel recently have escaped from Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Now they are on the move, wandering through the Sinai desert. When they come to the mountain, God and Moses meet and talk. For thirteen chapters or so God and Moses converse and negotiate. Moses receives God's law in the form of Ten Commandments. When he takes the two tablets on which the law is inscribed down to the people, he discovers them worshipping an idol, a golden calf. In a fit of rage Moses dashes the tablets to the ground, goes back up the mountain to resume the conversation with God and makes a simple request: Give me some proof that I'm on the right track. I badly need some credibility with these people. Do something to show how serious you are and how legitimate I am. At least tell me your plans. God's response to Moses is "I will go with you, and I will give you the victory."

That wasn't the question. So Moses tries again and gets an equally evasive answer. Moses is nothing if not determined, so he tries again but reduces his demands a bit. If you won't do something to give yourself - and me - some credibility, at least give me something to hold on to, some certainty. Let me see your glory - which the translators tell us means "the dazzling light of God's presence." And then Moses gets an answer - of sorts...

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, but you cannot see my face." And then this wonderful little vignette, which can easily be missed -

"there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." [Exodus 33:21-23]

It wasn't such an unreasonable request, really... not unlike what we want from our religion. A little certainty. He simply wanted a clear picture of who he was following and obeying. He wanted to be sure of himself at least before he pushed ahead into the wilderness at the head of that long column of griping, whining, golden calf-worshipping-people on their way to a promised land none of them had ever seen. It wasn't to be. No face-to-face encounters with God for Moses - yet. Moses was going to have to settle for the back side of God... a less than complete theology. Moses was going to have to be content with some poor symbols of the reality of God instead of the real thing - the memory of a burning bush, two tablets of stone, a voice that was maddeningly silent when he wanted to hear it...

There is in religion an almost irresistible inclination to try to see God's face, to reduce the infinite to the finite. In theology the name for it is "anthropomorphism" which means making God look like a human being. Michelangelo painted the God of creation as a muscular Zeus stretched across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; and the soaring rhetoric of the Westminister Assembly which wrote the basic theology of Presbyterianism back in the 17th century - and came up with the rhetorical equivalent of the Sistine Chapel... "There is but one only living and true God, invisible, immutable, immense, eternal, and incomprehensible," etc., etc., as if the mystery of God can be contained if we can just find art beautiful enough or words superlative enough.

Reinhold Niebuhr once noted that there is more religious confusion generated by "those who claim to know too much about the mystery of life than by those who claim to know too little." [The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, Mystery & Meaning, p. 237] Niebuhr went on to observe that people who claim to know too much fall into two categories, the scientific rationalists who don't believe anything that cannot be weighed, measured, tested, and proved in an equation - and religious people who know everything there is to know about eternal mystery.

"They banish the mystery," he said. And then, with a twinkle in his eye, I am sure, "They know the geography of heaven and hell, and the furniture of one and the temperature of the other."

There is, of course, great appeal to a rational religion which has an answer for everything.

In John Updike's novel, Roger's Version, a young computer whiz kid comes to a divinity school professor with a peculiar request. He wants a divinity school grant to prove the existence of God on a computer. He believes that if he can just crunch enough numbers, ultimate mystery will be revealed. "God is breaking through," he says. "They've been scraping away at physical reality all these centuries, and now the layer of the little left we don't understand is so fine God's face is staring out at us." [p. 20]

The Professor, Roger, responds - "I find your whole idea aesthetically and ethically repulsive. Aesthetically because it describes a God who lets himself be intellectually trapped, and ethically because it eliminates faith from religion, it takes away our freedom to believe or doubt. A God you could prove makes the whole thing immensely, oh, uninteresting. Pat. Whatever else God may be, he shouldn't be pat."

"But sir, think of the comfort to all those who want to believe but don't dare, because they've been intellectually intimidated. Think of the reassurance to all those in trouble or in pain and wanting to pray." [p. 24]

There is enormous appeal to an ethic with simple resolutions to complex dilemmas. How lovely if the Roe versus Wade debate about abortion would submit to biological and moral certainty. But it will not. People of good will, distinguished people, disagree about the definition of even the most basic terms - life, conception, viability. We are in the presence of mystery here and shouting our position through a bull horn does not alter that fact.

There is enormous appeal to a religion that reduces mystery, makes the infinite finite and encompasses the whole terrain of our humanness in a sequence of formulas everyone can understand.

A youngster standing outside the Art Institute yesterday was handing out literature for the Church of Scientology... I was prevented from stopping for an exchange of opinions by the person I was with - and it's a good thing because the cults have all the answers. There is no mystery. That's why people join them.

One time Woody Allen and Billy Graham were on the same television talk show. Allen was asked if he might convert on camera.

"I'm open to it. Life, it seems to me, is much easier if you're a believer. You can always come up with easy answers." [cited by Martin E. Marty, Context, Feb. 14, 1989, from Free Inquiry]

But it doesn't work. There is a mystery about us that defies explanation. If you have been in love you know that the experience is not adequately described as "hormones calling to hormones." If you have been privileged to witness human birth or human death you know that there is a moment when science is no longer adequate and that you are in the presence of mystery. Human nature, capable of exquisite beauty and the grossest evil, cannot be explained simply. Part of our fascination with the Nazi era is that there is a mystery to it. Sociology, psychology or simple religious platitudes don't adequately explain how the same culture produced Beethoven and Hitler, the Magnificat of J. S. Bach and Dachau.

I was reminded earlier this week of an entry in Robert Cole's Harvard Diary, the point of which was that if religion that "knows it all" isn't adequate to the mysteries of life, neither is an absolute commitment to scientific objectivity. Coles tells about visiting a medical school classmate who was terminally ill. He found his friend furious because he

had just been visited by the chaplain who was obviously a skilled practitioner of the latest psychological (and therefore scientifically respectable) methodology. "How was the patient feeling... How was he 'managing' in view of the 'stress' he had to 'confront.' Did he want to 'talk about' what was happening?" "The priest," says Coles, "no doubt believed himself to be tactful, respectful and considerate, but my friend was annoyed and later enraged. He had wanted to talk with the priest about God and his ways, about Christ's life and death, about heaven and hell - only to be approached with psychological words and phrases. 'Here he comes with a Roman collar and offers me psychological banalities as God's word.'" [p. 10-12]

My memory of the last funeral I attended as a worshiper and mourner, not as the presiding clergy, is one of irritation at the minister, a friend of mine, for talking too much. He said so much more than he had a right to say, I thought, much, much more than I wanted to hear. What happened was not simple. The life we were remembering was anything but simple. What the mourners were experiencing was not simple. It was offensive to be told that it is all really uncomplicated - when one knows one is in the presence of mystery.

The stuff of your life and mine is loving, yearning, hoping, dreaming, stretching, reaching beyond our grasp, sometimes succeeding and sometimes falling flat on our faces, suffering, doubting, despairing, but also rejoicing, celebrating, praying, dying... Mystery, all of it; none of it able to be reduced to simple, understandable formulas or platitudes.

And that is consistent with our religion. Popular religion may try to know too much, but Biblical religion doesn't let you see God's face.

> "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord." [Isaiah 55:8]

is the way the prophet Isaiah put it.

The God of the Bible makes a point of it, it would seem. God doesn't give Moses a good look for Moses' own sake. In the Bible, if you see too much of God you die. If there is no mystery left you are no longer human, it would seem. If there is no mystery left you no longer have the option of faith.

During Lent we are invited to draw near to the mystery, to approach the unanswerable questions of life and love and sin and death and resurrection once again, not in hopes that this year we'll get it right and have the answers, because we will not. We are invited in Lent to approach the mystery because to do so is important. In Lent we look intently at the one who came as God's good and loving word to the human family - but always stood apart from that family, never fully understood. Today, it is to follow those disciples up the mountain of transfiguration, where - if anyone ever had a chance to look into the face of God it was them - and to know with a terrible finality that they didn't do it either. When whatever happened on that mountain - Jesus' face shining, his appearance altered, his clothing dazzling white - whatever it is Luke is trying to tell us about Jesus, what he ends up telling us is that the disciples were

distracted, bored, sleepy through most of it; and what they catch of it they completely misunderstand. The mystery remains as a cloud descends over the whole scene.

And so it goes throughout, until this one, against all the common sense advice of his best friends, follows his sense of God's will and walks into the valley of the shadow of death and literally climbs up onto a cross and dies. There, this faith of ours proclaims, at that final mystery, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, there the reality of God is unveiled, the truth about God and about us is disclosed.

In Lent we approach the mystery... and at the cross of Christ we stand in its presence...

In this life we may never see clearly. St. Paul, who was more sure of some things than anyone - confessed the mystery with a poignancy and integrity we have come to love...

> "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
> Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully,
> even as I am fully understood." [1 Cor. 13:12]

The promise of the Gospel is not that we will have answers to all our questions and that all our quandries and dilemmas will be solved. The promise of the gospel is that ultimately we will see God...

In the meantime, like Moses, we'll have to do with the back side of God, a glimpse of the truth, a hint of the glory. In the meantime, there is this man who lived and loved and died for us. And until that day when you and I see face to face, it is an adequate portion of the truth simply to allow him to love us, and to hold tightly to him. Amen.

> Give us grace, O Lord, to live with
> the mystery of our own humanity and
> the mystery of your love for us. Give
> us the will to believe and the courage
> to live in the midst of uncertainty, and
> a portion of the truth as your faithful
> people: through Jesus Christ our Lord.
> Amen.